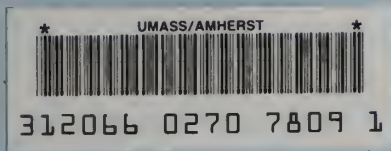


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*SPECIAL
COMMISSION
ON SCHOOL
VIOLENCE*

*FINAL REPORT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS*

March 1, 2000

INTRODUCTION

Last fall the Legislature established a Special Commission on School Violence. Section 352 of Chapter 127 of the Acts of 1999 empowered the Commission with “study(ing) methods of identifying potentially dangerous students and protecting the students, faculty and administration from acts of extreme violence.” The study was to include the detection of early warning signs, effective methods of intervention once a student is identified, the use of security guards or metal detectors in schools, appropriate levels of punishment for carrying guns in schools and peer and guidance counseling.

The Commission was required to conduct five (5) regional hearings to assist in the development of the guidelines and the establishment of criteria for recommendations by February 1, 2000, and to issue this report of results from the study by March 1, 2000. *Despite the tardiness of the state budget, the Commission was able to meet both of these deadlines.*

The Special Commission on School Violence consists of fifteen (15) members drawn from the legislative and executive branches of state government and the educational and public safety communities at the local level. The members of the Commission are:

Sen. James P. Jajuga

Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Public Safety

Rep. Timothy J. Toomey, Jr.

House Chair, Joint Committee on Public Safety

Sen. Robert A. Antonioni

Senate Chair, Joint Committee on Education

Rep. Lida E. Harkins

House Chair, Joint Committee on Education

Sen. Jo Ann Sprague

(for Senate Republican Caucus)

Rep. Reed V. Hillman

(for House Republican Caucus)

John Bynoe

(for Department of Education

Commissioner David Driscoll)

Michael Bolden

(for Executive Office of Public Safety

Secretary Jane Perlov)

Dr. Russell Goyette

(for Massachusetts Secondary School

Administrators Association)

Joseph A. O’Sullivan

(for Massachusetts Teachers Association)

James Philip

(for Massachusetts Federation of Teachers)

Chief Joseph Perritano

(for Massachusetts Police Chiefs Association)

Officers Michael Kirby and

Richard Giacoppo

(for Massachusetts Safety Officers Association)

The legislation also called for a representative of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents to serve on the Commission. Despite numerous requests from the Commission, no Superintendent was ever appointed to serve.

In a companion measure, the Department of Education’s fiscal year 2000 budget (line-item 7061-9611) earmarked \$250,000 for piloting a school threat assessment and response program designed by the North Eastern Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council (NEMLEC), a consortium of twenty-six (26) cities and towns in Essex and Middlesex Counties. NEMLEC was charged with reporting its findings to this Special Commission on School Violence on or before February 1, 2000.

On January 6, 2000 the Commission met for an organizing session. The five regional hearings were scheduled for late January in North Andover (North Andover Middle School), Worcester (Burnside Middle School), Plymouth (Plymouth South High School), Springfield (Central High School) and Boston (West Roxbury High School.) The Commission invited the superintendent and police chief from each community and regional school district in Massachusetts to attend their respective regional hearing, and asked them to send other interested parties to the hearings as well. Attorney General Tom Reilly and the eleven (11) district attorneys were also invited.

The five regional hearings were held between January 18th and February 1st, with nearly 200 people attending overall. Over 50 of them testified before the Commission on the school violence initiatives in their community, and their recommendations on what needed to be done to combat this problem. Their comments, and the extensive research done by the Commission and its staff, forms the basis of the Commission's recommendations.

While the mission of the Commission was "to study methods of identifying potentially dangerous students and protecting the students, faculty and administration from acts of extreme violence", it immediately became clear that the issue of school violence extends beyond this scope. The first hearing featured an extensive presentation and progress report on the School Threat and Assessment Response System (STARS) by the NEMLEC communities.

In its mission statement, NEMLEC sets forth the STARS goal as "to prepare, assess, respond and strive to prevent threats of violence in our schools through a regional program *that recognizes the individual uniqueness and integrity of each community.*" (italics added) This statement is a key element throughout the Commission's recommendations: each city and town in the Commonwealth has unique needs, and the role of this Commission is not to provide a template for each. Although the testimony from all corners of Massachusetts clearly shows that there are common issues and concerns, the Commission's recommendations are designed to fit the uniqueness and individual needs of each community.

The specific recommendations fall under two general categories: preparedness and prevention & intervention. In a number of cases, the Commission has referred to issues that are the subject of current legislation before the Legislature. It is the Commission's intent to support these policy goals, and not necessarily the particular bill currently being considered (as they are subject to change and revision throughout the session.)

PREPAREDNESS

Prepare safety protocols for each school in Massachusetts

The STARS program sets out eighteen different incidents/threat response areas, including written and electronic incidents (i.e. internet, E-mail), weapons/firearms incidents; gang activity; narcotics incidents; hate crime and diversity incidents; and fatalities, suicides or attempted suicides. Each of these potential incidents has an appropriate response classification and response level – either local, regional, or state/federal.



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RECOMMENDATION: *Using STARS as a working model, the Commission recommends that each school district in Massachusetts create safety protocols for all such incidents with the direct consultation of the local police department. Communities may consult either the STARS model or the Executive Office of Public Safety's "School Emergencies: Community Pre-Planning Guide", which is specifically designed to guide communities through the development and implementation of these contingency plans.*

The Commission recommends that local public safety agencies across the Commonwealth develop and practice responses to school-based critical incidents. The "Guidelines for Critical Incident Stabilization", published by the Executive Office of Public Safety, include specific instructions to help communities develop these contingency plans.

Develop formal cooperative relationships between school departments and law enforcement agencies

The development of an ongoing, trusting relationship between education and law enforcement communities is crucial. In the twenty-six NEMLEC communities, school superintendents and police chiefs signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), setting out the general principles of agreement, specific coordination and responsibility protocols, and the designation of responsible individuals for implementing and training procedures.

RECOMMENDATION: *In those communities and regional school districts where these relationships have not been formalized, the Commission recommends that such MOAs be implemented. The scope of the MOAs should include a cooperative agreement among the school superintendent, building principal, chief of police and appropriate designees (i.e. DARE officers), the District Attorney for the region; and the student leaders in the school, where possible. These expanded MOAs should be reviewed and renewed on a regular basis.*

The Commission also recommends that, as a part of any MOA being negotiated, school districts be required to report all criminal incidents to the police department for investigation.

Provide police presence in each school district in Massachusetts

A number of communities testifying before the Commission described efforts to provide a police presence in their schools. These efforts vary based on the size of the district, ranging from the placement of full-time police officers who are permanently assigned to a particular school, to periodic visits by police officers on a regular or as needed basis.

The key element for a successful police presence in schools is the enlistment of dedicated police officers who have been solicited because of their interest in, and genuine concern for, the students. The Springfield Public Schools presented a model worthy of consideration by other school districts across Massachusetts. The "Quebec Team" is a Student Support Unit

consisting of twenty-one (21) officers assigned to the 26,000-student system. These officers are specially chosen for their interest in working with students.

Another model to consider is the existing state-funded Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) grant program. One of the strengths of the DARE program is that it places students in contact with a uniformed police officer, in a school setting, in a climate that allows for students to develop a positive relationship with the officer. The Commission heard that this program is most effective when it is integrated into an overall health and safety curriculum and given adequate time in the schedule. Other school districts currently use school safety officers and school resource officers – which both received favorable testimony at Commission hearings.

RECOMMENDATION: *The Commission recommends that school districts develop an ongoing police presence to fit individual, unique situations. Of paramount importance is that such officers be chosen because of their interest in working with students. The police team assigned to a school district should also reflect, to the greatest extent possible, the racial and ethnic diversity of that community.*

Involve local police departments in school building and renovation projects in the planning stage

A concern raised by Sen. Jajuga and a number of public safety officials at the regional hearings is that these officials are not routinely involved in the school building and renovation planning process in communities.

RECOMMENDATION: *There are many aspects of a school's design that can either help or inhibit effective protection efforts. As part of the process of creating safety protocols, public safety departments should be involved (in an advisory capacity) in planning efforts for building new school facilities and renovating existing ones.*

For existing buildings, it is recommended that schools keep an updated, detailed blueprint of the school accessible within the school as well as with local public safety officials.

Establish an on-line clearinghouse for information on safe schools

The Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) has suggested the establishment of a database with information on existing violence prevention and preparedness programs, both in Massachusetts and nationally. This database could eventually be expanded to include evaluations of the effectiveness of such programs, as well as links to potential public and private funding sources and technical assistance for grant applications.

RECOMMENDATION: *The Commission encourages the Department of Education and the Executive Office of Public Safety to work together to establish such a clearinghouse.*

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Encourage cooperative efforts between education and public safety by passing an “information-sharing” bill

District attorneys across the state were unanimous in their support for the so-called “information-sharing” bill. The original version (Senate No. 745) which was filed by Sens. Jajuga and Berry and Rep. Ruane on behalf of Essex County District Attorney Kevin Burke, was redrafted with five related bills (House No. 4898) by the Joint Committee on Judiciary and given a favorable report on November 16, 1999. It is presently before the House Committee on Ways and Means.

House No. 4898 would allow district attorneys to establish community based juvenile/youthful justice programs in each district. This bill would allow the exchange of information about youth between law enforcement agencies (such as the District Attorney, the State Police and local police departments, and the Sheriff) and social service agencies (such as the Department of Youth Services, the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Department of Probation, and school-based nurses.) In no case would privileged information (as defined in M.G.L. Chapter 233, Sections 20B & J) be divulged.

RECOMMENDATION: The Commission strongly recommends that the Legislature enact, and the Governor sign, a strong “information-sharing” bill to achieve this goal.

Expand Community Based Justice (CBJ) programs to all grade levels, including elementary school

A recurring theme at the Commission hearings was that the problems with school violence in children are beginning to present themselves as early as the elementary school level.

RECOMMENDATION: The Commission recommends that existing Community Based Justice (CBJ) programs be expanded to include the elementary level.

Support Truancy Intervention Programs by granting truancy enforcement powers to local police officers

Senate Majority Leader Melconian and Hampden County District Attorney William Bennett have filed legislation (Senate No. 274) to amend M.G.L. Ch. 76 to allow state and local police officers “to apprehend and take to school without a warrant any truant or absentee found wandering in the streets or public places of the city or town in which the police officer is employer or to which the police officer is assigned.”

The Joint Committee on Education, Arts & Humanities redrafted this bill, in conjunction with two other bills, as Senate No. 1855. It directs the Department of Education to identify districts with low attendance rates and requires them to use a portion of Chapter 70 aid to

hire a supervisor of attendance and a police officer, if necessary. Such a police officer may be eligible for additional duty pay under collective bargaining requirements.

***RECOMMENDATION:** The Commission encourages the Legislature and Governor to support strong legislation to allow police officers to assist local communities with identifying and apprehending truants.*

Raise dropout age from 16 to 18

Per regulations promulgated by the Commissioner of Education under M.G.L. Ch. 69, Sec. 1B, the legal dropout age for students in Massachusetts is currently sixteen (16) years of age.

***RECOMMENDATION:** The Commission recommends that the Department of Education raise the age to eighteen years of age. There are opinions on both sides of this issue, but a majority of the Commission feels that, except under the most special of circumstances, students should not be allowed to drop out of high school under they have reached the legal age of adulthood.*

Enhance penalties for individuals who commit violent crimes in schools

Governor Cellucci and Lieutenant Governor Swift have filed legislation (House No. 4744) to strengthen the penalties for crimes committed in or around schools. This bill, which is currently being studied by the Legislature's Joint Committee on Criminal Justice, would add additional penalties to sentences relating to violent crimes on or near school property or at school sponsored events. Both the law enforcement and school administrator representatives on the Commission embraced this measure.

***RECOMMENDATION:** The Commission recommends that the Legislature move favorably on such legislation, and shares the Governor's conviction that we should have zero tolerance for violence in our schools.*

Support programs to encourage positive behavior at the elementary level

One of the disturbing things heard at the regional hearings was that "bullying" of students at a young age is often a contributing factor to violent behavior in later years. It is important for elementary school students to learn positive behavior from the earliest possible time.

There are a number of programs being used in schools at the elementary level to foster self-esteem, character building and appropriate methods of conflict resolution for young students. At a recent Youth Violence Forum in Lowell, Lt. Governor Swift announced a \$1 million initiative targeting bullying prevention.

The Executive Office of Public Safety is developing a bullying prevention curriculum targeting both perpetrators of bullying and their victims. As the Columbine incident demonstrated, victims of bullying may become aggressors of violence. Therefore, their needs as victims must be addressed.

RECOMMENDATION: *The Commission recommends that the Department of Education encourage similar curriculum initiatives at the elementary school level across Massachusetts.*

Provide alternative programs/schools for middle and high school students who have been expelled or who are having serious difficulties in school

The Education Reform Act of 1993 gave principals broad powers to expel difficult students from a normal classroom environment. While this has had the positive effect of removing disruptive problem students from the classroom, the repercussions are also significant when these same problem students suddenly find themselves on the street.

Additionally, there are many teenage students who have difficulty thriving in a traditional school environment. Providing an alternative setting for them may be the difference between keeping them in school on the path to graduating, or losing them to the streets.

An outstanding example of an effective alternate school program is the Champion Horace Mann Charter School in Brockton, which provides alternative high school graduation opportunities for students who choose to return to school after dropping out of a traditional high school setting. Such charter schools are one possible approach to creating genuine alternatives for troubled youth.

RECOMMENDATION: *The Commission recommends that school districts establish alternate education programs to address the needs of students who have been expelled from school, or who may need an alternative to a traditional school environment.*

Increase parental involvement and support

The role of parents is key in supporting and encouraging young people to do well in school. With the changes in our society in recent years it is often difficult, if not impossible, for parents to take as active a role as they should.

RECOMMENDATION: Nevertheless, the Commission encourages state and local educators to provide support for parental involvement whenever possible. In particular, programs to teach basic parenting skills to middle and high school students are a positive step in ensuring that today's students will be tomorrow's better parents when they have children of their own.

CONCLUSION

While the mandate of the Special Commission on School Violence was initially focused on the preparedness side of the equation, it quickly became clear during the regional hearings that the prevention and intervention recommendations would be equally, if not more, important in coming to grips with the myriad of issues around "school violence".

The Legislature has also created a commission on adolescents at risk in Section 339 of Chapter 127 of the Acts of 1999. The mission of this commission is to make an investigation and study relative to adolescents at risk, including, but not limited to, youth involved with the department of youth services and social services; teen pregnancy and parenthood; teens and HIV/AIDS; substance abuse issues; school dropouts, truancy and violence; gangs; teen dating violence; suicide; mental health needs; teen homelessness and other issues related to adolescence.

It is the hope of the Special Commission on School Violence that the study of issues for adolescents at risk will pay particular note to the intervention-focused recommendations in this report, and will use them as a starting point for its own work later this year.

Many of those testifying before the Commission (as well as a number of Commissioners themselves) spoke to the issue of resources to implement the Commission's recommendations. While there is always a fierce competition for limited budget funding, the Commission is hopeful that such resources could be made available *with the understanding that it would be inadvisable to divert already limited education and public safety funding to these new initiatives without providing additional state assistance wherever possible.*

The members of the Special Commission on School Violence would like to thank staff members Paul Fahey, Christopher Ciulla and Noelle Logue for their invaluable assistance in supporting the Commission's activities and in writing this report.

